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Who will blow a whistle in behalf of a whistle-blower?

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IF you want to tell the Internal Revenue Service that your neighbor is cheating on his income tax, the government will treat you as a public-spirited citizen, rewarding you with 10 percent of whatever it collects from the rascal's audit.

If, on the other hand, you want to tell the Proper Authorities about a violation of the regulations for nuclear safety perhaps, or toxic waste disposal maybe, watch out! An employee who, as they say, blows the whistle on an employer in the interests of preventing another Three-Mile Island or Bhopal may, as they also say, get canned — and with no assurance at the moment that he or she will be reinstated.

The cautionary example for all those about to purse their lips and give a little tootle is a safety inspector dismissed from his job after informing his employer of what he judged to be flawed welding at the Comanche Peak nuclear plant, under construction near Glen Rose, Texas. After hearing the case, the Labor Department awarded the inspector reinstatement, back pay, and legal fees. But a United States Court of Appeals has overturned the decision, ruling that the inspector was eligible for protection only if he reported the alleged violations to the government.

In fact, the rules of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission instruct safety inspectors to report hazards to their employers first, and then to the government only if the employer takes no action. But since the Labor Department, as of this writing, has not appealed the case, the safety inspector from Comanche Peak is now dangling, like the whistle he may wish he had never blown.

Better he had charged somebody — anybody — with tax evasion.

Who will blow the whistle in behalf of a whistle-blower?

Our very unsafe safety inspector is the victim of the law of thermopolitical dynamics, which goes like this: If a less powerful person or group makes things hot for a more powerful person or group, that person or group is likely to make things an awful lot hotter for junior.

The whistle-blower also runs a subtler risk of ostracism. Life is made not only infernally hot, but just a little shameful. From school days on, the alternative terms for whistle-blowing are pronounced mostly with a curled lip of disdain. One tattles. One snitches. One sings. One squeals. One informs.

The dreadful image of Benedict Arnold hangs like a dark hint in the air.

Loyalty — the virtue of men-in-groups — is silently invoked. Even if a whistle-blower proves correct, he is seen as a troublemaker, a rocker-of-boats — definitely not a team-player.

Ask the lonely heroes in the General Accounting Office who've been blowing whistles on government waste all these years.

But at the very time that whistle-blowing is being made difficult for the Little Guy, the Big Guy seems to be blowing his whistle all over.

The CIA, for the first time, is being allowed to conduct "covert activities" within the United States.

The FBI has been given extra latitude for practicing surveillance, according to new "domestic security" guidelines.

The National Crime Information Center has set up a computer file to maintain watch on citizens loosely described as "anti-authority or anti-law enforcement."

The use of the lie detector as a personnel-screening device is increasing.

What else are these acts of vigilance but a kind of reverse whistle-blowing by the state, playing safety inspector in matters far less definable than the manufacture of nuclear energy or the disposal of toxic waste?

It is one thing to blow the whistle on a flaw in the welding. It is another thing to blow the whistle on an "anti-authority" idea or an "anti-law" attitude of the heart. How the whistles would shrill for Henry Thoreau!

Nobody is against vigilance, but a balance of whistle-blowing power ought to be zealously maintained. If a state dispenses less and less information about its own operations while demanding more and more information about its citizens, sooner or later democracy will be in trouble, as Thoreau would be the first to point out.

Whistle-blowers should not be exempt from whistles being blown on them. But they must be respected precisely because they are inconvenient. Socrates, also known as a gadfly, and Jeremiah, also known as a prophet, were whistle-blowers.

The whistle-blower is the person we appoint in our best moments to keep us honest at our worst moments, and in the moments in between, we must do our best to remember that.

A Wednesday and Friday column